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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000347

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: POLICE KEEP HANDS TO THEMSELVES AT CHERNOBYL PATH

REF: A. MINSK 310

[1](#)B. MINSK 331

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Although smaller than in 2006, this year's April 26 "Chernobyl Path" demonstration in Minsk enjoyed a turnout of approximately 3,000 people and was not marred by the authorities' typical violence and mass arrests. Using loudspeakers and a heavy police presence, authorities made sure demonstrators stayed on the sidewalks and obeyed traffic rules as they marched from the Belarusian Academy of Sciences to Bangalore Square. OMON riot police detained and beat a small group of activists after the demonstration ended, but event organizers called it an isolated incident, as the authorities' policy was not to harm anyone in light of recent U.S. and EU warnings to GOB officials. Demonstration organizers openly criticized de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's absence from the event. End summary.

Two Groups of Demonstrators Merge

[1](#)2. (U) Approximately 2,000 people gathered at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS) on April 26 at 18:00 to participate in the annual Chernobyl Path (reftels). Five hundred demonstrators attempted to congregate at Yakub Kolas Square, where the opposition originally planned to hold the demonstration. However, security services sealed off the square an hour before the event, letting no one cross the territory and angering pedestrians who were forced to walk around as they were returning home from work.

[1](#)3. (U) Holding opposition national white-red-white and EU flags and banners reading "No to a Second Chernobyl," "Only the Dead Do Not Fear Radiation," and "Rebellion for Freedom," the small group of demonstrators marched on the sidewalks of Independence Avenue to the BNAS, where approximately 1,500 fellow demonstrators had already gathered, some dressed in gas masks and yellow radiation suits, holding similar flags and banners.

Authorities Make Discussion at BNAS Impossible

[1](#)4. (U) At the BNAS, head of the Chernobyl Path organizing committee Ivan Nikitchenko was unable to address the crowd because authorities seized the organizers' sound system equipment. Nikitchenko resorted to using a small megaphone, but few could hear him as the police repeatedly warned demonstrators with a loudspeaker that they were to move to Bangalore Square.

The March Begins

¶15. (SBU) After 30 minutes, demonstrators began the mile-long march to the Chernobyl Church at Bangalore Square, shouting slogans "Long Live Belarus" and "Join Us." Police cars followed the crowd and uniformed police officers lined the sidewalk to prevent demonstrators from entering the street. Observing police noticed that although demonstrators were observing the traffic and pedestrian laws, it was the police's overwhelming presence that caused the standstill in traffic.

A Moment of Silence

¶16. (U) When the march reached the Chernobyl Church at Bangalore Square at 20:00, the size of the demonstration had reached approximately 3,000 people. As planned, demonstrators stood in silence for 21 minutes -- a minute for each year since the Chernobyl disaster. Afterwards, the demonstrators dispersed.

Reports of Beatings, Detentions

¶17. (C) The next day, independent Belarusian online news sources reported that OMON riot police forces beat and detained 16 people after the demonstration. At an April 27 press conference, Deputy Head of the Belarusian National Front (BNF) and Chernobyl Path organizer Viktor Ivashkevich confirmed the beating, but called it an "isolated incident." According to what the detainees told Ivashkevich, OMON forces

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stopped beating the demonstrators after someone from the security forces leadership yelled to the OMON commander on the radio, telling him not to "lay a hand" on anyone. Ivashkevich noted that the same caution was used at the police station, as those detained were let go by 22:30 without being processed or indicted on charges.

Chernobyl Path a "Success"

¶18. (C) Demonstration organizers at the press conference called the Chernobyl Path a "success," despite some hiccups on both the authorities' and opposition's sides. They exaggerated the size of the demonstration, claiming 10,000 people participated, and stated that the Chernobyl Path occurred in a much calmer setting than the recent March 25 Day of Freedom protest. Nikitchenko stressed that outside influence, particularly the U.S. and EU's firm stance, was the reason authorities did not engage in the usual violence, preemptive detentions, and mass arrests. However, the organizing committee would complain to the city prosecutor's office about the authorities' confiscation of sound system equipment and the beating of demonstrators. Organizers would also complain about a two-block section of the march route, which was under construction and littered with wood pallets, concrete blocks, potholes and trailers, posing a hazard to demonstrators. (Comment: This stretch of the avenue has been under repair for more than a month, thus we doubt the authorities intentionally exposed the activists to safety hazards. End comment.)

Milinkevich a No-Show

¶19. (C) Organizers castigated opposition activists who refused to march to Bangalore Square. Ivashkevich cited the independent newspaper Nasha Niva's refusal to cover the demonstration as an example. According to Ivashkevich, Nasha Niva on April 24 called the proposed route to Bangalore an "insult" and predicted few would participate. A larger

insult was de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's failure to attend. Ivashkevich did not have a reason for Milinkevich's absence, but was deeply concerned. After the conference, Nikitchenko -- a die-hard supporter of Milinkevich -- lambasted Milinkevich, stressing that he was "unfit" to be a leader and vowing not to support him at the upcoming congress of democratic forces.

Regional Chernobyl Path Also a Success

¶10. (C) DCM and Poloff observed two Chernobyl events in Mogilyov April 26. The first, officially sanctioned by local authorities, was attended by about 1,000 people ranging from those clearly obligated to participate - in uniforms - and more casual attendees including about 30 democratic opposition activists. Unlike last year, the opposition was allowed to place flowers at the memorial as part of the ceremony. In a separate unsanctioned event on a hillside overlooking Mogilyov and the Dnepr river, 50 opposition supporters conducted a brief memorial. Together with plainclothes BKGB, police were in attendance, questioning some of the participants and ostentatiously filming the proceedings. Participants thanked DCM for observing, stating that without international pressure it is unlikely that the unsanctioned event could have been held.

Comment

¶11. (C) This year's Chernobyl Path attracted fewer people than the one in 2006, but the 2007 demonstration was calmer and untainted by mass arrests prior to and following the event. As Nikitchenko pointed out, we can at least partly attribute the authorities' restraint to U.S. and EU pressure, particularly EUR DAS David Kramer's April 23-25 Minsk visit and his warnings to senior GOB officials that continued repression at the event would add to the pressure for more U.S. sanctions. However, it is unfortunate that the opposition's de facto leader, Milinkevich, failed to show up. Although the reason for his absence remains unknown, Milinkevich continues to frustrate some of his strongest supporters.

Stewart